

Reporter's Notebook

Praise for Gorbachev From a Lithuanian Admirer

By MAUREEN DOWD

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WASHINGTON, May 4 — Everyone thought she had come to bury Mikhail Gorbachev, not to praise him.

"I want to spread rose petals in his path," Prime Minister Kazimiera Prunskiene of Lithuania told A.F.L.-C.I.O. leaders here today, "so that when he comes to Washington at the end of the month he will be more popular than he has ever been in his life."

No one could understand. Conservative Republican senators like Jesse Helms of North Carolina, Malcolm Wallop of Wyoming and Alfonse D'Amato of New York and influential Washington columnists had eagerly hoped that Mrs. Prunskiene would provide grist to skewer Mr. Gorbachev as a heartless villain choking off fuel and food from the brave Lithuanians struggling for freedom. That way, they could attack President Bush as too soft on the Soviet President.

Instead, in a remarkable twist, the Lithuanian Prime Minister has used her visit here to provide President Bush with grist to laud Mr. Gorbachev — a risky approach that would seem, on the surface, to undermine the aspirations of Lithuania by encouraging the notion that the Soviet President is a terrific guy who deserves Western support.

Rapport With Gorbachev

But Mrs. Prunskiene, an economist, is a most uncommon politician. Instead of pitting herself and Lithuania against Mr. Gorbachev and the Soviet Union, she has linked their fates in a positive way.

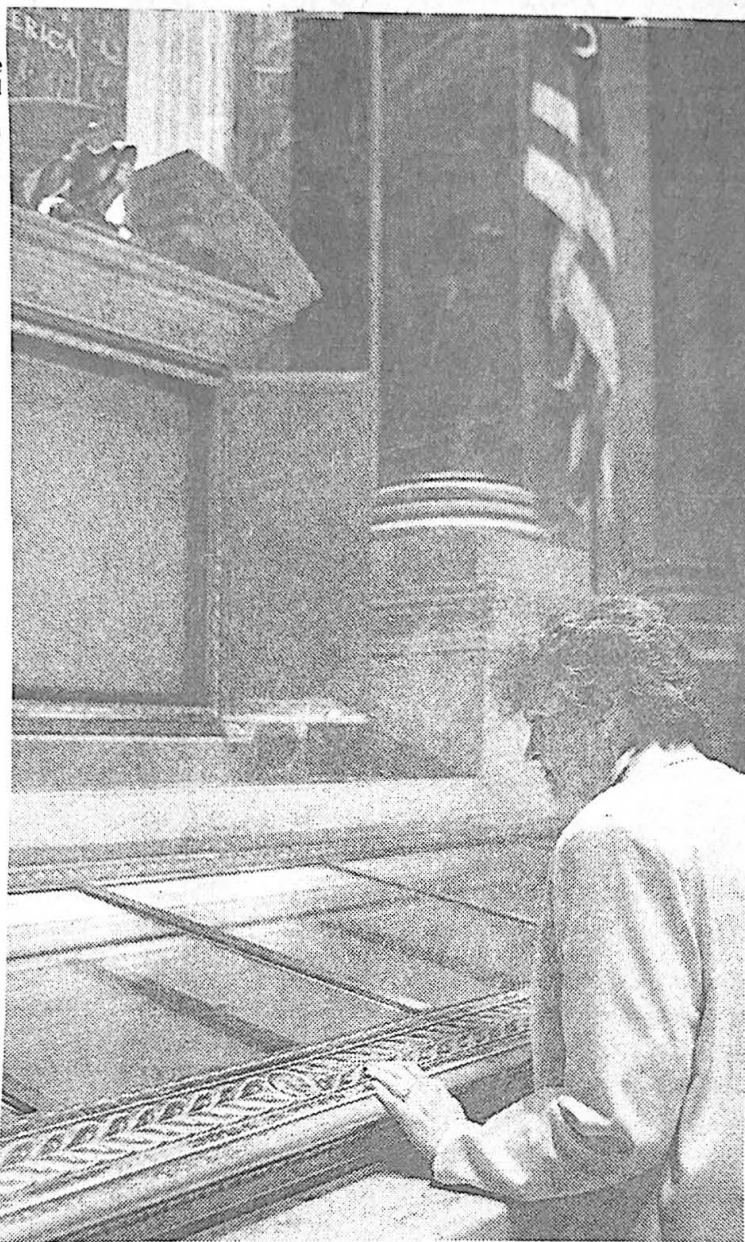
At a dinner with columnists and reporters on Thursday night, the 47-year-old Prime Minister noted that she and the Soviet President had "a personal rapport." Asked if she would vote for him if he were running for election right now, she replied that she would.

She stressed to everyone who asked about Mr. Gorbachev this week, "We are not angry at each other." And she modified her tart statement about the Soviet President's being "the world's darling" to say that she understood the cult of Gorbachev because "for many years, he was my 'darling,' too."

Her friends explained that the two had helped her as she pursued her academic work.

businesslike temperaments, frank "I must add that for my own people, the people in Lithuania and me personally, we have been favorably affected when Mr. Gorbachev came to power," she said today at the National Press Club. "And I would confess that I, too, have admiration for President Gorbachev."

She explained sympathetically that Mr. Gorbachev was suffering from a Pandora's-box effect — a man who cannot completely control the forces of democracy that he has unleashed.



Prime Minister Kazimiera Prunskiene of Lithuania has surprised some American politicians by praising President Mikhail S. Gorbachev of the Soviet Union. On a visit yesterday to the National Archives, she viewed the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution.

When she saw a color picture of herself and President Bush on the front page of The Washington Times today, she exclaimed in delight: "I want an extra copy of this. I want to give it to Gorbachev."

Charm, and Steel

Even in the most tumultuous moments, even with a tiny republic fighting for liberty halfway around the world, there are still "handlers."

The Lithuanians hired a Democratic political-consulting firm, the

Miller/Sawyer Group, to coordinate the Prime Minister's visit. A consultant, Mark Johnson, juggled the cascading invitations for the Lithuanian leader, including one from Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher of Britain to stop by on the way home, and feelers from Bonn and Paris. But Mrs. Prunskiene showed that she didn't need political advice.

At a coffee in her honor at the Senate this morning, George Mitchell, the Democratic majority leader, pointed out 87-year-old Senator Strom Thurmond, the South Carolina Republican, as a fine example of American energy.

"You shouldn't have told me how old he is," she chided Mr. Mitchell. "I never would have guessed." The delighted Mr. Thurmond promptly declared the Prime Minister "pretty and smart."

Besides personal charm, Mrs. Prunskiene showed political steel.

In her remarks at the press club, she slapped the Western nations, declaring, "I say that simply making statements that there should be compromises urging the Lithuanians and the Soviets to sit down at the bargaining table is not adequate at this time when the Soviets are interfering in Lithuania's ties with Western countries."

Sole Woman of Rank

At the press club, the Prime Minister was asked what it was like to be the only woman heading a government in Eastern Europe.

"I am accustomed to being in the presence of many men," she replied with a smile. "I am the only woman of rank in the government. And sometimes I look around me and think that the shape of democracy and the process of democracy might be well served if there were more women involved."

Slights That Hurt

Mrs. Prunskiene was hurt by her mingy reception at the White House on Thursday, which had earlier the same day given quite an elegant reception to Prime Minister Michael N. Manley of Jamaica, with flags and an honor guard and a motorcade through the gate and lunch.

She was especially hurt that security guards searched her purse and refused to let her brother, Rimantas Stankevicius, who serves as her executive assistant, onto the White House grounds. He had to sit in the park across the street and wait for her.

But she never complained publicly and instead treated the incident with amused disdain. At the press club, she noted that when she arrived and saw a truck blocking the White House gate from the inside, "I was somewhat concerned that this was the logical consequence of the economic blockade launched against Lithuania."